

The background of the entire page is an abstract artwork. It features large, angular, translucent shapes in shades of blue and white, set against a dark, almost black background. The shapes appear to be layered and overlapping, creating a sense of depth and movement. The lighting is dramatic, with some areas being brightly lit while others are in deep shadow.

Lee Boroson:

Underpass

Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris

Lee Boroson: *Underpass*

October 29, 1999–March 17, 2000

Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris

The Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris  
is funded by Philip Morris Companies Inc.

This brochure accompanies the exhibition

“Lee Boroson: *Underpass*,” organized by Debra Singer, branch  
curator, Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris.

All photographs, unless otherwise indicated:

Lee Boroson. *Underpass*, 1999 (installation view)

Page 2 (bottom): Lee Boroson. *Underpass*, 1999 (installation detail)

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945 Madison Avenue at 75th Street

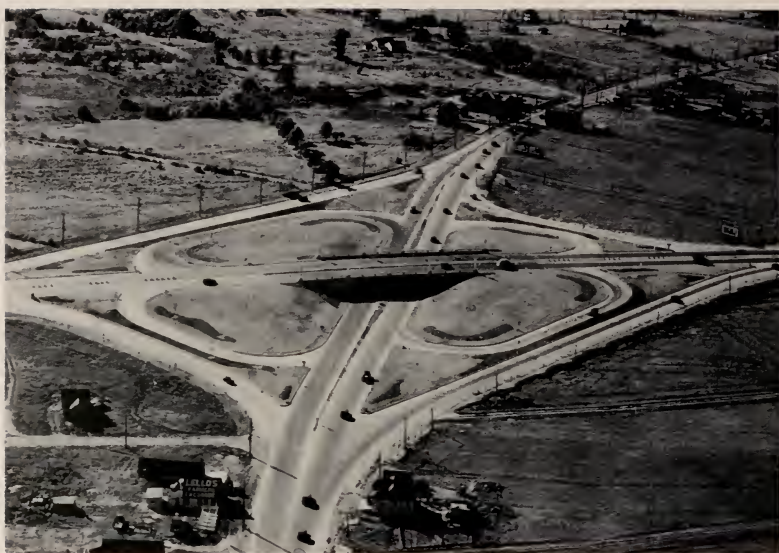
New York, NY 10021

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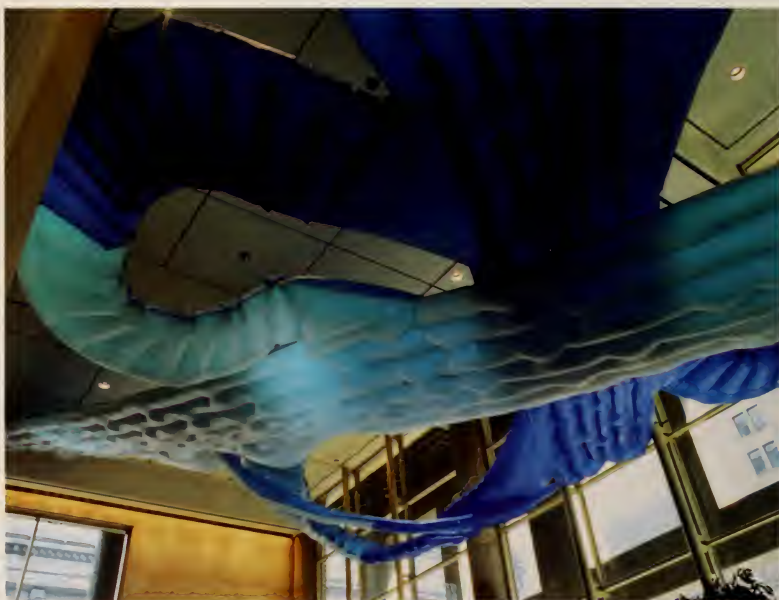
## Surface Tension

Hovering overhead, across the expansive span of the Philip Morris Sculpture Court, are the flowing curves and forceful lines of Lee Boroson's luminous fabric sculpture, *Underpass*. The piece, despite its immense size, appears surprisingly airy and light, as its overlapping horizontal planes of blue and white counter the towering verticality of the 42-foot-high surrounding walls. Created from a translucent, silky material generally used to make parachutes, the sculpture takes advantage of the large glass windows on all sides and diffuses light in dramatic ways. How, and to what extent, the piece refracts the artificial and natural light depends on the time of day and on shifts in the weather. By temporarily changing the configurations of the architecture and reflecting color and light, *Underpass* transforms the atmosphere of this unusual atrium-like setting and alters our physical perceptions of being in, and moving through, the Sculpture Court.

Gazing upward at *Underpass*, you might imagine that the outdoors has moved in and that you stand beneath a sky or a running river. The work's organic feel is enhanced by air currents, originating from a fan embedded in the building's crawlspace, which pulse through the piece, causing it to billow and sway, as if it were a living, breathing creature. As the title suggests, however, the sculpture's form relates to more than natural phenomena. The structure is also associated with highway design, specifically a cloverleaf traffic exchange pattern. In this type of road system (and in the sculpture itself), four individual circles loop around a central straight thrust, creating a linear scheme that resembles a four-leaf clover.



*World's First Cloverleaf Interchange near Woodbridge, NJ, Built in 1928.*  
New Jersey Department of Transportation, Trenton



In its practical application, this arrangement allows for efficient change of direction and speed as cars enter or exit the highway. In this museum context, however, the pattern mirrors various properties unique to the Sculpture Court. The form echoes the views onto the bustling intersection of 42nd Street and Park Avenue, which reveal two levels of car traffic on the street and elevated bridge. It also resonates with the unusual diagonal path of pedestrians as they walk across the space from one entrance to another.











*Underpass* equally takes into account the function of the building to which the Sculpture Court is attached. While the Sculpture Court is essentially a leisure space—an urban garden where people stop to enjoy a cup of coffee or eat lunch—the rest of the building is a workplace, namely, the international corporate headquarters of Philip Morris Companies. To Boroson, the cloverleaf road design is also an appropriate metaphor for the kind of streamlined transfer of





information and flow of communication that are fundamental to running a productive business.

Such directed “transfers” and “flows” of people, cars, or data allude to what Boroson refers to as “navigation systems”—structural arrangements designed to guide our movements and consequently affect how we comprehend our surroundings. Such systems are mimicked within the piece itself: air, propelled by an energy source, is routed through quilted channels,

prompting exchanges between energy and matter that result in noticeable fluctuations of the sculpture's form.

Boroson's interest in "navigation systems" led him to study not only highway planning and road design but also traditional French, Dutch, and German formal gardens. Despite their opposing purposes, both utilitarian road plans and traditional recreational gardens share many formal characteristics. Boroson explains, "Although conceptually you may not think highway and garden layouts have much in common, when you look at photographs and diagrams of aerial perspectives, they possess many similar geometries."<sup>1</sup> Many formal gardens are designed, for example, against a basic grid scheme that then allows for the orderly development of intersections and pathways. As a result, schematic maps of roads and gardens can sometimes look remarkably alike.

Boroson's analogous applications of such layouts to his work become apparent by comparing *Underpass* to *Pleasure Grounds* (1999). In this latter installation, a gridlike arrangement of hanging, green-and-white, circular, pneumatic forms skim the surface of the floor. Unlike the experience of walking through an actual garden, where you are in the thick of things, this work places the viewer in the position of looking down on an artificial garden and surveying the entire plan at a glance. An imaginary world is invoked here, not only through the privilege of an aerial perspective, but also through Boroson's deceptive use of scale. On the one hand, each of the dangling units suggests an outsized flower or floating lily pad. On the other, each component can also be interpreted as a condensed grouping of "vegetation," implying that an entire garden has now shrunk to Lilliputian proportions. The elements are simultaneously too big and too tiny to be reconciled with any notions of reality.

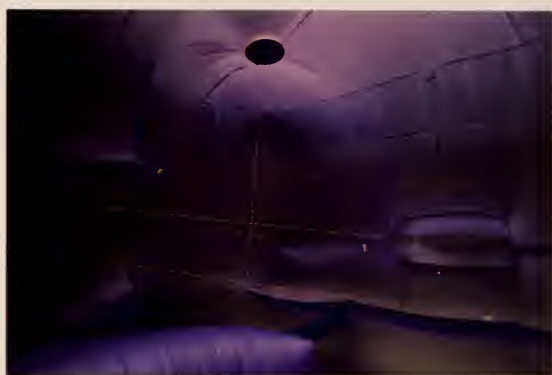
*Underpass* similarly manipulates vantage and scale. As viewers, we are placed in the fantastical position of standing underneath an unsupported expressway, an indoor sky, or the water's surface. These various imaginary associations draw attention to the relativity of scale. Despite its impressive



Lee Boroson. *Pleasure Grounds*, 1999. Nylon, blowers, and electrical cord, dimensions variable. Collection of the artist (installation view, Genovese/Sullivan, Boston)

measurements, *Underpass* can also appear surprisingly small. Tamed by the parameters of the building, it is only a fraction of the size of the real-world counterparts to which it alludes. The

proportions of the piece in no way match the actual dimensions of a massive highway overpass, an infinite expanse of sky, or the length of a winding river.



Boroson's interest in utilizing ideas about navigation in his sculptures grew out of earlier sewn-fabric sculptures that he designed to be both objects and environments. *Room with a Phew* (1995), for example, is a playful, purple-blue sculpture in the shape of a rounded-off square with protruding, rectilinear compartments. Not only can you walk around the piece to observe its exterior contours, but you can also go inside it and see the innards of its making. Its fanciful form and color are reminiscent of a Moonwalk bubble at amusement parks, where you can also enter and be transported into a surreal atmospheric world.

Since 1995, Boroson has shifted from self-enclosed environments toward structures that not only retain visible connections to the surrounding architecture, but also are integrated into it. *Underpass*'s form, for instance, is so closely linked to the specific architectural conditions of the Sculpture Court that it cannot be placed in any other location. After the show concludes, the elaborate, labor-intensive sculpture is taken

Top and bottom:  
Lee Boroson. *Room with a Phew*, 1995. Ripstop nylon, blowers, zipper, vinyl, string, and webbing, dimensions variable. Collection of the artist (installation view, Munson-Williams-Proctor Institute, Utica, New York)



down and stored; it can only exist again as an artwork if it is reinstalled in this exact space and manner.

The construction of a dependent relationship between a sculpture and its site recalls the work of Postminimalist artists from the 1960s and 1970s. Boroson, in fact, has explained that the work of Richard Serra and Robert Irwin has been an important influence. Serra is best-known for large-scale, site-specific, steel or concrete sculptures that reorient the viewer's physical understanding of a particular place. Although comparable in scale and intention, Boroson's soft, fabric sculptures do not exude the hard, cold, almost-threatening, presence of Serra's sculptures. Rather, they communicate a sense of intimacy and approachability: they may be large, but they are gentle giants.

Perhaps closer connections in form and purpose are apparent between Boroson's work and that of Robert Irwin. Irwin frequently makes sculptural installations using tautly stretched, transparent scrims in conjunction with natural and fluorescent light. Making use of the qualities inherent to these materials, he experiments with shadows, color, and reflections in order to explore interrelationships among space, light, and matter. Irwin's work, like Boroson's, intervenes within a given environment to prompt new bodily experiences of that place.

Boroson differs significantly from his predecessors, however, in the way he strives to activate a tension between observations of a concrete reality and possibilities of a fabricated illusion. His sculptures revel in their evocations of imaginary places and perspectives, all the while keeping the "real world" in full sight. Tellingly, Boroson refers to his works as "viewing machines," apparatuses that redirect how we "look." *Underpass*, then, can be understood to provide an alternative lens through which to experience the Sculpture Court and its surrounding areas. In so doing, it also offers insight into the highly complex and individual nature of perception itself. Perception, the way we make sense of the world around us, is revealed to be an ambiguous process, determined as much by our prior experiences and expectations as by our immediate visual and visceral impressions of the moment. — Debra Singer



# Lee Boroson

Born in Stamford, Connecticut, 1963

State University of New York,

New Paltz (BFA, 1985)

Indiana University, Bloomington

(MFA, 1989)

The Skowhegan School of Painting  
and Sculpture, Maine (1989)

Lives and works in Brooklyn,  
New York

## SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

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1991

"Three Dimensions," Mandeville  
Gallery, University of California,  
San Diego, La Jolla

1993

"93 New York 50," Socrates Sculpture  
Park, Long Island City, New York

1996

"L'Art du plastique," École Nationale  
Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, Paris

1997

"Emerging Sculptures #10," Sculpture  
Center, New York

1998

"Here: Artists' Interventions at the  
Aldrich Museum," The Aldrich  
Museum of Contemporary Art,  
Ridgefield, Connecticut

## SELECTED ONE-ARTIST EXHIBITIONS

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1992

Quint/Krichman Projects, San Diego,  
California

1997

Derek Eller Gallery, New York  
"Whitewater," Newhouse Center for  
Contemporary Art, Snug Harbor  
Cultural Center, Staten Island,  
New York

1999

"Pleasure Grounds,"  
Genovese/Sullivan, Boston

"Polter-Zeitgeist: A Survey of  
Mischievous Art," Cape Museum  
of Fine Arts, Dennis,  
Massachusetts

1999

"Lee Boroson and Heidi Schlatter,"  
Momenta Art, Brooklyn, New  
York

"Zero-G: When Gravity Becomes  
Form," Whitney Museum of  
American Art at Champion,  
Stamford, Connecticut

"1999 Biennial Exhibition of Public  
Art," Neuberger Museum of Art,  
Purchase College, State University  
of New York, Purchase

Whitney Museum of American Art  
at Philip Morris  
120 Park Avenue at 42nd Street  
New York, NY 10017

*Gallery Hours*

Monday–Friday, 11 am–6 pm

Thursday, 11 am–7:30 pm

*Sculpture Court Hours*

Monday–Saturday, 7:30 am–9:30 pm

Sunday, 11 am–7 pm

*Gallery Talks*

Wednesday and Friday at 1 pm

Free admission

Tours by appointment

For more information,

call (917) 663-2453.

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by John Soares.

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